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Top aide says Westmoreland withheld key Viet troop data

NEW YORK (AP) — A two-star general who was a top aide to Gen. William C. Westmoreland in Vietnam accused his old boss yesterday of suppressing key information on enemy strength for political reasons.

Testifying for the defense in Gen. Westmoreland's \$120 million libel suit against CBS, retired Maj. Gen. Joseph A. McChristian said Gen. Westmoreland prevented him in May 1967 from notifying officials in Washington that several categories of communist forces were much larger than had been reported.

"When I presented the cable to Gen. Westmoreland, he read it, he looked up — looked at me — and said, 'If I send this cable to Washington, it will create a political bombshell,'" Gen. McChristian testified. "He said, 'No, leave it with me, I want to go over it' ... The only concern he expressed to me was a political concern."

Gen. McChristian's testimony supported an important part of "The Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam Deception," the 1982 CBS documentary that Gen. Westmoreland says was a false and malicious attack on his reputation.

The 1982 broadcast charged that the general prevented President Johnson, other Washington officials and the public from learning that communist forces were larger than they had been told.

The network says Gen. Westmoreland, who commanded U.S. forces in Vietnam from 1964 to 1968, was

afraid that the reports would undercut political support for the war.

As a result, the documentary said, American leaders may have been taken by surprise when the communists launched their powerful Tet offensive against South Vietnam's cities in early 1968.

Gen. Westmoreland maintains that no information was suppressed and that the former military and intelligence officers interviewed by CBS were merely on the losing side in a professional disagreement.

He testified earlier in the 17-week-old trial that after receiving Gen. McChristian's cable he demanded a briefing, after which he decided that communist "self-defense" and "secret self-defense" forces were not a military threat and should be dropped from the enemy strength estimate.

Gen. McChristian had proposed a sharp increase in the estimated size of those units.

But he testified that Gen. Westmoreland said nothing to him about wanting a briefing. Gen. McChristian was transferred out of Vietnam a few weeks after delivering the cable and became a commander at Fort Hood, Texas.

According to testimony earlier in the trial, the briefing was delivered by the enemy strength expert, Col. Gains Hawkins, who is expected to testify for CBS later in the trial.

Several witnesses have testified that the enemy strength issue emerged again shortly after Gen. McChristian left for Texas when the

CIA proposed using figures similar to his in a "special national intelligence estimate."

The CIA pressed for an estimate of more than 500,000 communist troops, while Gen. Westmoreland's

intelligence staff — then headed by Gen. Phillip Davidson — sought a figure under 300,000. The CIA eventually adopted the lower figures, which were reported in November 1967.

Gen. Davidson, who was not interviewed for the broadcast, testified that Gen. Westmoreland did not impose any arbitrary ceiling on the strength estimate.

But Gen. McChristian maintained that Gen. Westmoreland's political concerns prevented him from including the higher strength figures in his final reports before leaving Vietnam.

"All my training in the Army has emphasized that the Army is to remain non-political," Gen. McChristian said. "It is standard practice that intelligence reporting should report the facts as you have them, and not to be concerned with any political considerations."